

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Occupational stigma and career exploration: Testing mediation and moderation effects of Mianzi concern

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## ABSTRACT

This research is grounded in the Conservation of Resources theory to examine the impact of perceived occupational stigma on the career exploration of tour guides. This research examines the mediating and moderating influence of Mianzi concern in the relationship between perceived occupational stigma and career exploration. A total of 421 valid responses were gathered from full-time tour guides in China. The research employed the Partial Least Squares structural equation modelling approach. The research demonstrated that Mianzi concern mediates the relationship between perceived occupational stigma and career exploration. However, the moderating effect of Mianzi concern was not supported. This study enhances the understanding of the impact of occupational stigma and the elements that promote external career exploration, providing insights for reducing or removing occupational stigma.

**Keywords:** perceived occupational stigma; Mianzi concern; career exploration; tour guides

## 1. Introduction

Career exploration has garnered substantial attention among undergraduate students; however, lifelong career exploration—defined as an individual's ongoing reconstruction and adaptation of their career in response to constantly changing career environments—has become an area of growing academic interest currently<sup>[1]</sup>. In unpredictable and volatile circumstances, people often have anxieties about their future job prospects, prompting them to engage in external career exploration<sup>[2]</sup>. In China, tourism professionals, particularly tour guides, face significant occupational stigma<sup>[3,4]</sup>. Widespread reports of immoral behavior by tour guides, including forced shopping and verbal mistreatment of customers, have ruined their reputation<sup>[5]</sup>. Moreover, tour guides are seen as occupying a submissive or servile role in their interactions with consumers, exacerbating the stigmatization<sup>[5]</sup>. Tour guides provide a crucial function in the tourism sector by serving as interpreters and cultural communicators, safeguarding visitor safety, enhancing tourist well-being<sup>[3-5]</sup>.

Occupational stigma refers to society's negative judgment of certain professions, leading to a diminished professional reputation due to physical, social, or moral concerns, and often resulting in prejudice<sup>[6]</sup>. In China, tour guides have been associated with unethical practices and scandals, such as coercing tourists into shopping and mistreating customers<sup>[5,7]</sup>. Moreover, the nature of the tour guide

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profession requires them to fulfill or exceed customer expectations, similar to frontline service workers who are sometimes treated as subordinates or “servants” to customers; this imbalance further intensifies the occupational stigma experienced by tour guides<sup>[5]</sup>. Studies have revealed that occupational stigma significantly affects employees’ psychological well-being, leading to increased stress, emotional exhaustion, diminished job satisfaction, and higher turnover intentions<sup>[5,8]</sup>. Consequently, occupational stigma constitutes a crucial but insufficiently investigated factor shaping tour guides’ career exploration decisions. Despite growing academic discourse on career exploration<sup>[9]</sup>, little is known about the extent to which occupational stigma accelerates this process in the tourism sector, presenting a pressing research gap.

In China, particularly within the Confucian cultural context, Mianzi (face) significantly influences social status, reputation, and interpersonal relationships<sup>[10]</sup>. Mianzi symbolizes multiple aspects of self-worth, including self-esteem, social recognition, credibility, and competitiveness<sup>[10-12]</sup>. Given the importance of reputation in the tourism industry, tourism professionals are particularly sensitive to Mianzi concerns<sup>[11]</sup>. Ting-Toomey categorizes Mianzi into three dimensions: self-Mianzi, other-Mianzi, and mutual-Mianzi<sup>[13]</sup>. This study focuses on self-Mianzi, which refers to an individual’s concern for personal image and reputation. In this regard, tour guides’ perceived occupational stigma negatively affects their professional reputation and image, thereby influencing their Mianzi concerns and leading to increased career exploration<sup>[13]</sup>. Prior studies have demonstrated that Mianzi significantly impacts individuals’ psychological states and behaviors<sup>[13]</sup> such as employee self-esteem<sup>[12]</sup> and consumer purchasing behavior<sup>[19]</sup>.

This study has three core research questions: First, how does perceived occupational stigma lead to tour guides’ career exploration and how does resource dynamics allocation operate in this process? Second, how does occupational stigma influence Mianzi concern among tour guides? Third, how does Mianzi concern mediate and moderate the association among perceived occupational stigma and career exploration. This research, based on the Conservation of Resources theory, explores the micro-level dynamics of resource transformation to understand how tour guides psychologically and behaviorally respond to occupational stigma. First, the findings suggest that Mianzi concern acts as a mediator; this conclusion provides insight into the significant role that face culture plays in the decision-making process regarding career paths and offers fresh perspectives on investigating occupational stigma and cultural influences. Last but not least, this research attempts to provide viable strategies for mitigating the professional stigma associated with tour guides.

This research advances the study of lifelong career exploration among tourism practitioners by integrating the cultural construct of Mianzi with the concept of occupational stigma. By focusing on the symbolic meanings associated with Mianzi, the study reveals how reputation and social status concerns—triggered by occupational stigma—drive practitioners to explore alternative career options that offer greater social respect. Additionally, this study extends the application of COR theory by illustrating how the psychological pressure resulting from occupational stigma motivates tour guides to seek alternative, non-stigmatized career paths. This research also contributes to travel agencies by offering practical strategies to mitigate occupational stigma and addressing tour guides’ psychological aspects and Mianzi sensitivity to improve retention.

## **2. Literative review and hypothesis development**

### **2.1. Conservation of resources theory**

This study uses the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory to examine the impact of changes in guides’ psychological and professional behaviors due to occupational stigma. According to COR theory,

psychological and behavioral alterations transpire in stressful environments<sup>[14]</sup>. Moreover, individuals safeguard their valuable resources and regard potential and actual resource loss as a threat<sup>[14]</sup>. Furthermore, people may use strategies to safeguard against resource depletion, mitigate stress, prevent further resource investment, or reallocate resources to get enhanced returns as compensation for resource loss<sup>[14]</sup>. In this study, occupational stigma results in a depletion of psychological resources, including self-esteem, professional identity<sup>[3,4]</sup>, and career exploration, which they use as a defensive strategy to safeguard against more resource loss. Moreover, concerns of Mianzi make tour guides more sensitive to their professional reputation and image, magnifying the negative psychological impact of tour guides facing occupational stigma, which may deplete their psychological resources<sup>[12]</sup>. Consequently, the cultural element of Mianzi concern strengthens the influence of stigma on external career exploration. This study broadens the application of COR theory by incorporating the cultural context factor Mianzi concern. Previous studies have primarily used COR theory to explain how individuals cope with stress in general occupational contexts. Additionally, it extends COR theory to occupational stigma and external career exploration in the tourism sector, emphasising how the cultural element of Mianzi influences the perception and ramifications of resource threats.

## **2.2. Occupational stigma and career exploration**

Occupational stigma refers to the negative stereotypes and devaluation associated with certain occupations and their workers<sup>[6]</sup>. The stigma linked to work is regarded as “dirty labor”<sup>[15]</sup>. Such expressions symbolize the broader image of the public stigma associated with certain professions and sectors, shaped by stereotypes, discrimination, and diminished reputations<sup>[6]</sup>. Tour guides have been emphasized as stigmatized due to their association with servile positions<sup>[3-5]</sup>. Unethical conduct has specifically connected tour guides, including verbally disparaging visitors and forcing customers to purchase for a commission<sup>[5,7]</sup>.

Career exploration is the process of actively seeking and evaluating information on various career routes, matching their decisions with personal beliefs and external labor market requirements<sup>[9]</sup>. This process functions as an adapting mechanism, enabling people to manage career shifts and uncertainty<sup>[1]</sup>. Although job exploration can be linked to favorable professional advancement, it may also be prompted by adverse employment circumstances<sup>[1]</sup>, such as occupational stigma. While people perceive their careers as stigmatized, they may be more likely to seek alternate career pathways to avoid the unfavorable societal attitudes associated with their occupations<sup>[2]</sup>. Previous research shows that people facing occupational stigma are likely to resign from their jobs and pursue other professional paths<sup>[6]</sup>. Tour guides, confronted with adverse attitudes and precarious job prospects, may be more inclined to pursue career exploration as a reaction to occupational stigma. According to the COR theory, occupational stigma influences individuals' career exploration as a tactic used to safeguard their resources under pressure<sup>[11]</sup>. The following hypothesis is proposed based on the aforementioned discussion:

H1: Occupational stigma has a positive influence on career exploration

## **2.3. Occupational stigma and Mianzi concern**

Stigma poses a significant risk to a tour guide's psychological well-being<sup>[3,4]</sup>. The study found that occupational stigma led to a decline in self-esteem, burnout, and professional disidentification among tour guides<sup>[2-5]</sup>. Mianzi is a term in Chinese social psychology that represents an individual's reputation, self-esteem, and social status<sup>[10]</sup>. Mianzi, grounded on Confucian cultural norms, especially in interpersonal interactions, wants to be protected and not lost<sup>[11,12]</sup>. For tour guides who care about Mianzi, losing Mianzi correlates with diminished respect, credibility, and competition. Due to the association with professional stigmas, scandals, immorality, poor social standing, and other adverse professional perceptions<sup>[2-5]</sup>, tour guides are likely to be more concerned with issues related to Mianzi. According to the Conservation of

Resources (COR), Mianzi is a significant psychological resource<sup>[12]</sup>. For tour guides who prioritize reputation, the context of professional stigma poses a threat to this resource, further amplifying the concern about Mianzi. The following hypothesis is proposed based on the aforementioned discussion:

H2: Occupational stigma has a positive effect on Mianzi concern.

## **2.4. Mianzi concern and Career exploration**

Career exploration is a self-regulatory behavior driven by personal and contextual factors, allowing individuals to navigate career uncertainties and align their career decisions with psychological and social needs<sup>[9]</sup>. Within the influence of occupational stigma, an increased concern about Mianzi may act as a reason for career exploration. Mianzi concern pertains to an individual's reputation, social standing, and lack of respect by society<sup>[10,11]</sup>. Moreover, Mianzi concern has an impact on cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses<sup>[11-13]</sup>. Individuals facing losing their Mianzi, particularly those in stigmatized professions, may use defensive methods to alleviate Mianzi loss<sup>[11,12]</sup>. Goffman describes such strategies as facework, including avoiding conduct, complying with social norms, and handling one's reputation<sup>[17]</sup>. People concerned about their reputation may be more inclined to avoid stigma jobs to protect their reputation<sup>[12,13]</sup>. Therefore, tour guides concerned about Mianzi may be inclined to pursue alternative careers that are not stigmatized and have a higher social status. According to COR theory, the loss of personal resources drives individuals to engage in behaviors that safeguard their valuable resources<sup>[14]</sup>. Mianzi is a crucial resource in social interactions, and occupational stigma adversely affects this resource, prompting individuals to adopt efficient efforts for resource protection. Career exploration serves as a strategy to mitigate further damage to Mianzi. Following this, we hypothesize that:

H3: Mianzi concern has a positive effect on career exploration.

## **2.5. Mianzi concern as a mediator between occupational stigma and career exploration**

The role of a mediator variable is to explain the process and rationale by which an independent variable affects a dependent variable<sup>[18]</sup>. According to Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, individuals are motivated to protect and acquire valuable resources, including social recognition and self-esteem<sup>[14]</sup>. Occupational stigma threatens these resources by undermining individuals' social standing and professional self-worth, which in turn heightens their Mianzi concern<sup>[11,12]</sup>. Thus, mianzi concern mediates the relationship between occupational stigma and career exploration, transforming perceived stigma into career-related actions aimed at resource recovery.

As tour guides perceive occupational stigma, they become increasingly sensitive to potential social judgment and reputational loss, leading to a stronger desire to restore their public image<sup>[12]</sup>. Career exploration, in this context, serves as a means of resource recovery—individuals may actively seek alternative career paths with higher social prestige to compensate for the perceived damage to their status. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

H4: Mianzi concern mediates the relationship between occupational stigma and career exploration.

## **2.6. Mianzi concern as a moderator between occupational stigma and career exploration**

A moderator identifies the conditions in which the connection between an independent variable and a dependent variable is stronger or weaker, in contrast to a mediator that elucidates the process of influence<sup>[18]</sup>. According to COR perspective, individuals with high Mianzi concern perceive occupational stigma as a severe resource loss, making them more likely to explore new career opportunities to restore their social standing<sup>[12]</sup>. This strengthens the link between stigma and career exploration. Conversely, those with low Mianzi concern do not view social reputation as a key resource, and occupational stigma poses a weaker

threat. As a result, they are less inclined to engage in career exploration, leading to a weaker relationship between occupational stigma and career exploration. Similarly, studies have shown that individuals with heightened Mianzi concern adjust their consumer behavior, such as purchasing luxury products<sup>[19]</sup>, further supporting the idea that high Mianzi concern strengthens the link between stigma and career decision-making. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

H5: Mianzi concern moderates the relationship between occupational stigma and career exploration.

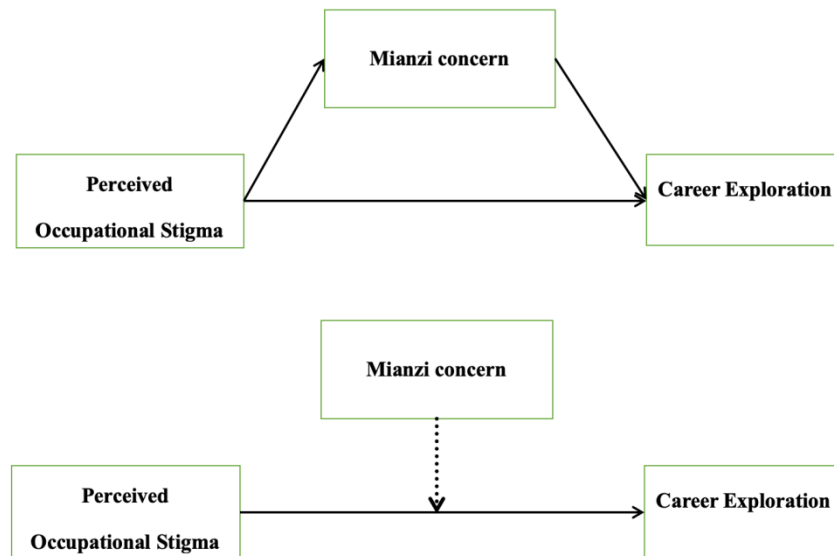


Figure 1. Research framework.

Source: Created by the authors

### 3. Methods

#### 3.1. Research design

This study employed a quantitative method, gathering data via an online survey. The population of this study is full-time Chinese tour guides. A purposive sample method is used to guarantee the validity of responses. This method involves the strategic selection of participants based on predefined criteria<sup>[20]</sup>, specifically targeting full-time Chinese tour guides who have signed labor contracts with travel agencies, while excluding part-time tour guides. The questionnaire is conducted by online distribution. To reach the target population, the researchers collaborate with tourism associations and travel agencies across different regions of China. A total of 95 travel agencies agreed to participate in the survey. The manager of each travel agency was contacted to identify full time tour guides. Based on this process, a total of 563 questionnaires were distributed to eligible tour guides via the managers. The collecting of questionnaires lasted eight months. In this study, 142 invalid questionnaires were excluded, including those with response times under 60 seconds and those in which consistently select the same option. After data cleansing, the final sample includes 421 individuals. The minimal sample size for this research, calculated using G\*Power, was 77; the final sample of 421 participants exceeded this requirement.

The sample's demographic characteristics are presented in **Table 1**. The majority of respondents are female (74.8%), while males account for 25.2% of the sample. The majority of participants are aged 18 to 25 years (59.1%), followed by those aged 26 to 31 years (26.6%). Regarding educational background, the majority have attained an undergraduate degree (66.5%), while 15.4% have completed junior college

education, and 16.2% hold a graduate degree or higher. Participants' length of service varies widely, ranging from less than six months (13.3%) to more than eight years (7.1%). Finally, the respondents' personal average monthly income ranges from 3,000 yuan or less (19.2%) to over 9,000 yuan (4.0%).

### 3.2. Measurement items

The scale used in this research was derived from preexisting scales with some alterations pertinent to the subject matter, sourced from previous reputable studies, and detailed in **Appendix 1**. Furthermore, we used a 7-point Likert scale. Additionally, five experts were invited to translate the scale from English to Chinese, reverse it to English, and conduct a face validity test of the scale.

**Table 1.** Demographic profile of respondents.

		N	Percentage
Gender	Male	106	25.2%
	Female	315	74.8%
Age	18~25	249	59.1%
	26~30	112	26.6%
	31~40	49	11.6%
	41~50	8	1.9%
	Above 50	3	0.7%
Education	Junior high school	8	1.9%
	Junior college	65	15.4%
	Undergraduate college	280	66.5%
	Graduate student or above	68	16.2%
length of service	Less than half a year	56	13.3%
	0.5-1 year	98	23.3%
	1-3 year	158	37.5%
	3-5 year	60	14.3%
	5-8 year	19	4.5%
	More than 8 years	30	7.1%
Personal average monthly income	3000 and below	82	19.2%
	3001-5000 yuan	148	35.2%
	5001-7000 yuan	139	33.0%
	7001-9000yuan	36	8.6%
	More than RMB 9,000 yuan	17	4.0%
Valid		421	100.0%

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Common method bias

PLS-SEM with Smart PLS 4.0 vision was the method that we applied for the analysis of our data. This study may be susceptible to common method bias (CMB) due to the use of self-reported, single-source data, which can introduce systematic variance and inflate observed relationships<sup>[23]</sup>. To evaluate the extent of CMB, Harman's one-factor test was conducted, incorporating all measurement items into a principal

components analysis. The results identified nine distinct factors, with the first factor accounting for 46.97% of the total variance—below the 50% threshold <sup>[23]</sup>. Nonetheless, based on the current analysis, CMB is unlikely to have significantly compromised the validity of the study's findings.

#### 4.2. Assessing the outer measurement model

Evaluating both reliability and validity is essential for assessing the outside measurement model<sup>[24]</sup>. **Table 2** indicates that the Cronbach's alpha values surpass the required 0.70 threshold, demonstrating good reliability. In addition, the research evaluated the convergent validity by adhering to three criteria that were suggested by Fornell and Larcker. These criteria are as follows: the loading of each item ought to exceed more than 0.50, composite reliability (CR) of every construct ought to be greater than 0.70, and the AVE of every construct ought to be greater than 0.50 <sup>[25]</sup>.

**Table 2.** Assessment of the measurement model.

Constructs	items	Factor Loadings	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability (rho_c)	Average variance extracted (AVE)
Perceived Occupational Stigma(POS)	POS1	0.760	0.826	0.876	0.587
	POS2	0.772			
	POS3	0.826			
	POS4	0.755			
	POS5	0.720			
Mianzi Concern(MC)	MC1	0.723	0.923	0.939	0.687
	MC2	0.838			
	MC3	0.843			
	MC4	0.884			
	MC5	0.853			
	MC6	0.838			
	MC7	0.813			
Career Exploration(CE)	CE1	0.815	0.888	0.918	0.691
	CE2	0.823			
	CE3	0.848			
	CE4	0.833			
	CE5	0.837			

To assess discriminant validity, we applied the criterion established by Fornell and Larcker <sup>[25]</sup>, as presented in **Table 3**, demonstrating that the validity requirements were met. The average variance extracted (AVE) of a latent construct should be greater than its correlations with any other construct, according to this criterion<sup>[25,28]</sup>. Discriminant validity is affirmed if the diagonal values in the correlation matrix exceed the equivalent off-diagonal values within the same row and column. This study's findings show that the constructs are distinct and participants are capable of distinguishing among them.

**Table 3.** Fornell-larcker – Discriminant validity analysis.

	Career Exploration	Mianzi Concern	Perceived Occupational Stigma
Career Exploration	<b>0.831</b>		
Mianzi Concern	0.592	<b>0.829</b>	
Perceived Occupational Stigma	0.576	0.536	<b>0.766</b>

### 4.3. Structural model

The results of hypothesis testing, which was conducted using bootstrapping in Smart PLS4, are presented in **Table 4**. A bootstrapping procedure was implemented to improve the reliability of the results, which involved the use of 5,000 resamples<sup>[26]</sup>. Additionally, variance inflation factor (VIF) analysis was performed to assess potential multicollinearity concerns. VIF values below 5 are considered acceptable<sup>[27]</sup>. In this study, the VIF values ranged between 1 and 3.212, indicating that multicollinearity was not an issue.

The results demonstrated that POS was positively associated with CE ( $\beta = 0.357$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), supporting Hypothesis 1. Similarly, POS exhibited a significant positive effect on Mianzi concern (MC) ( $\beta = 0.540$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), providing support for Hypothesis 2. Moreover, MC was a strong predictor of CE ( $\beta = 0.391$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), hence confirming Hypothesis 3.

**Table 4.** Structural model estimation.

Hypotheses	Paths	Path Coefficients	95% Confidence Interval	T	P	Decisions
H1	POS→CE	0.357***	[0.213, 0.516]	3.748	0.000	Supported
H2	POS→ MC	0.540***	[0.407, 0.651]	8.572	0.000	Supported
H3	MC→CE	0.391***	[0.249, 0.531]	5.840	0.000	Supported
H4	POS→MC→CE	0.211***	[0.131, 0.309]	4.546	0.000	Supported
H5	POS x MC→CE	-0.010	[-0.129 0.093]	0.168	0.866	Unsupported

**Note(s):** \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \* $p < 0.05$ . POS = Perceived Occupational Stigma, CE= Career Exploration,

MC = Mianzi Concern

### 4.4. Mediation analysis

**Table 4** presents the results of mediation effect of MC in the relationship between POS and CE was assessed following Zhao et al.'s (2010) recommendations<sup>[28]</sup>. The results indicated a significant indirect effect of POS on CE through MC ( $\beta = 0.211$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), suggesting that MC serves as a partial mediator in this relationship. Thus, Hypothesis 4 was supported.

### 4.5. Moderation analysis

The moderation analysis was conducted to examine Hypothesis 5, which proposed that the interaction between POS and MC would significantly influence CE, as presented in **Table 4**. However, the interaction term was not significant ( $\beta = -0.010$ ,  $p = 0.866$ ), indicating that MC does not moderate the relationship between POS and CE. Consequently, Hypothesis 5 was not supported.

The  $R^2$  value is indicative of the degree to which the independent factors account for the variance in the dependent variable<sup>[26]</sup>.  $R^2$  values of 0.26 (considerable), 0.13 (moderate), and 0.02 (weak) are recommended for endogenous latent variables<sup>[29]</sup>. In **Table 7**, the structural model demonstrates strong predictive capability in elucidating CE ( $R^2 = 0.444$ ), MC ( $R^2 = 0.291$ ). We assessed the model's predicted relevance and accuracy using  $Q^2$  values<sup>[26]</sup>. The  $Q^2$  values for the endogenous constructs were 0.323 for CE, 0.279 for MC. The



data provide a sufficient degree of predictive relevance, since a  $Q^2$  value over 0 indicates that the model has predictive significance.

**Table 5.** Determination coefficient and cross-validated redundancy analysis.

Constructs	R-square	$Q^2 (=1 - SSE/SSO)$	Predictive Relevance
CE	0.444	0.323	$Q^2 > 0$
MC	0.291	0.279	$Q^2 > 0$

The impacts of predictor variables were evaluated using  $f^2$  values, categorized as small (0.02–0.15), moderate (0.15–0.35), and large ( $>0.35$ )<sup>[29]</sup>. The **Table 8** presents the  $f^2$  values associated with each construct in the framework. The effect size of POS on MC was substantial ( $f^2 = 0.411$ ). In contrast, the effect of POS on CE was moderate ( $f^2 = 0.169$ ), the effect of MC on CE was moderate ( $f^2 = 0.199$ ).

**Table 6.** Effect size analysis.

	CE	MC	POS
CE	-		
MC	0.199	-	
POS	0.169	0.411	-

## 5. Discussion

The results of this study confirm that the first hypothesis is valid. Occupational stigma influences tour guides to explore alternative occupations. This finding aligns with prior research on perceived occupational stigma in the casino service industry, where stigma led employees to leave their jobs<sup>[16]</sup>. The result is similar to previous studies showing that perceived occupational stigma affects individuals' career choices<sup>[11]</sup>. Our findings suggest that stigma has an impact on tour guides' career self-management, potentially leading some tour guides to seek out occupational opportunities that are without stigma.

The results also support the hypothesis 2. Perceived occupational stigma increases practitioners' concern about Mianzi. This is in line with earlier findings on the occupational stigma experienced by hotel interns<sup>[11]</sup>. Our study demonstrates that mianzi carries multiple symbolic meanings in Chinese culture, such as respect and social standing, and that occupational stigma damages practitioners' occupational image and societal status, thereby contributing to a perceived loss of Mianzi.

Hypothesis 3 is supported. The results of this study are consistent with previous research on occupational stigma in the tourism industry<sup>[11]</sup>. Our findings suggest that the cultural factor of mianzi influences individual career exploration. In the context of mianzi culture, individuals tend to pursue careers that are respected and associated with high social status.

Hypothesis 4 is supported. Previous research has indicated that occupational stigma in the tourism industry negatively impacts employees' career commitment and increases their withdrawal intentions<sup>[16]</sup>. However, limited research has examined the function of Mianzi concern as a mediating factor between perceived occupational stigma and career exploration, especially with Chinese tour guides. The findings indicate that work-related stigma significantly predicts Mianzi concern, which in turn influences career exploration. This aligns with COR theory, which suggests that individuals experiencing job-related stigma may develop concerns about their social image and professional reputation, prompting them to seek alternative career paths to protect their self-esteem and social standing. In the case of tour guides, concerns about social perception and external judgment due to their stigmatized profession may intensify their desire

to explore new occupational opportunities. It was shown that Mianzi concern serves as an explaining factor between perceived occupational stigma and career exploration, hence validating the mediation hypothesis. This result aligns with prior research demonstrating that occupational stigma impacts face concern and affects individual career choices<sup>[11]</sup>.

Hypothesis 5 is unsupported. Our findings do not support the hypothesis that Mianzi concern moderates the relationship between occupational stigma and career exploration. It is possible that career exploration is influenced not only by face concerns but also by factors such as career satisfaction and income. Future research should explore additional moderators, such as organizational support, coping mechanisms, or personality traits, to better understand the conditions under which occupational stigma leads to career exploration.

## **6. Conclusion**

### **6.1. Theoretical implications**

The research contributes to the body of literature on professional stigma by incorporating Mianzi concern as a critical psychological mechanism in the association among occupational stigma and career exploration. It highlights the sociocultural dimension of occupational stigma in China. Given the strong emphasis on social reputation in Chinese society, Mianzi concern is particularly relevant in explaining why individuals in stigmatized professions may seek career alternatives.

Moreover, this study advances COR theory by demonstrating that perceived occupational stigma depletes psychological resources, prompting individuals to engage in career exploration as a proactive strategy to mitigate identity threats. Integrating Mianzi concern into this framework enhances our understanding of the social-psychological consequences of occupational stigma among tour guides.

### **6.2. Practical implications**

According to the perspective of practicality, our findings recommend that travel agencies need to implement strategies to mitigate occupational stigma and address tour guides' concerns regarding the loss of Mianzi. First, enhancing professional recognition is crucial. It is necessary to promote a positive image of tour guides through media campaigns, such as sharing positive stories and images of tour guides on social media and news platforms. Second, managers should offer clear career advancement pathways and development programs to increase job satisfaction and reduce the need for career exploration due to stigma. Third, given the role of face concern in career decision-making, organizations should implement mentorship programs and social support networks to help employees manage stigma-related challenges in a culturally sensitive manner.

### **6.3. Limitations and future research**

This research has several limitations. First, the data used in this study were obtained through a single questionnaire, which means that they may be subject to response bias<sup>[30]</sup>. Future studies may include qualitative interviews or a longitudinal design to get a more profound comprehension of the impact of occupational stigma on practitioner psychology and behavior. Second, this study was limited to Chinese tour guides, which may limit the applicability of the findings to other occupations or cultural contexts. Future research could explore whether similar trends exist in different occupations or countries to broaden the understanding of this phenomenon. Third, future research could also consider other culturally relevant variables or cross-cultural studies comparing differences in Mianzi concern in collectivist and individualist cultural contexts<sup>[31]</sup>.

## Author contributions

Jinwen Zhang was a major contributor in advising the manuscript and to the conception of the study; Jinwen Zhang collected, analyzed, reported data and wrote whole the manuscript; Rafiq Muhammad writing—review and editing; Rafiq Muhammad supervision; Rafiq Muhammad and Lim Yet Mee project administration, All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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## Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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## Appendix1

### Measurement Items

<i>Perceived Occupational Stigma (POS) Kusluvan et al. (2022)</i>	<i>1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree)</i>
I think society is prejudiced about my occupation. My occupation is generally associated with a bad image. I am sometimes rated less because of my occupation. I worry that people talk about me because of my occupation. I have been associated with a negative image by someone whom I have just met because of my occupation.	
<i>Career Exploration Stumpf et al. (1983)</i>	<i>1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree)</i>
I often investigate other career possibilities. I always go to other career orientation programs. I often obtain information on specific jobs. I often initiate conversations with knowledgeable individuals in other career areas. I always obtain information on the labor market and other job opportunities.	
<i>Mianzi Concern (FAC) Oetzel et al. (2008)</i>	<i>1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree)</i>
I'm afraid of bringing shame on myself. I'm afraid of not being able to protect my self-image. I'm afraid of embarrassing myself in front of the other person. I'm afraid of not being able to maintain my dignity in front of the other person. I'm afraid of not being able to maintain my own poise. I'm afraid of appearing weak in front of the other person. I'm afraid of not being able to protect my personal pride.	